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On world stage, St. Paul gets its ovation

From the facilities to the area's famed friendly ways, visitors left impressed

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As the saying goes, there are many ways to view an elephant. Especially one as big as the Republican elephant that shook the Twin Cities last week.

What did it look like? Sarah Palin, Hurricane Gustav, glitzy parties, masked anarchists, departing anchors, expensive suits, riot police, global attention, John McCain, peace marchers, chanting delegates, Katie Couric, tear gas.

With the 2008 Republican National Convention over, here's an assessment of what worked — or didn't — during a week like no other.

CONVENTION FACILITIES

If there's one unqualified, undiluted success from the Republican National Convention, it's the raves for the convention facilities in downtown St. Paul.

"Stupendous," said Maria Cino, the president of the 2008 Republican National Convention.

The St. Paul trio of the Xcel Energy Center, the RiverCentre and the Roy Wilkins Auditorium provided a massive amount of high-quality space. That was well beyond what was found in almost every other previous convention city — including Denver, which hosted the Democratic National Convention.

The facilities in St. Paul had lots of advantages, Cino said. The arena's wide corridors allowed networks "to build out the best TV studios we ever had" while still allowing for plenty of concourse room.

And for once, the convention floor and the media were housed in adjacent permanent structures, not stuck in tents and not located far away.

In the media village encampment, the most oft-heard comment all week was, "This is a lot nicer than Denver."

— Tom Webb

ON TELEVISION

While all eyes were watching Hurricane Gustav heading toward the Gulf Coast on Monday, St. Paul could only sit and wait for its time in the national spotlight.

Gustav wasn't as bad as some had predicted, and by Tuesday, all three of TV's major news anchors were broadcasting live from the Republican National Convention inside the Xcel Energy Center. Cable networks CNN, Fox News Channel and MSNBC set up shop in St. Paul, too.

So, how did St. Paul look, you might ask? For the most part, the national media shied away from the gas-masked officers, anarchists and tear gas — if you wanted to see that on TV, you'd have to tune in to the local news.

But from inside the dressed-up X or quaint Rice Park, things looked pretty good. As Brian Williams said last week, "If you don't like St. Paul, you've got a screw loose."

Plus, it was a good week for gawking. If you wanted

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to catch a glimpse of Joe Scarborough, Chris Matthews or Rachel Maddow, they were pretty easy to track down.

— Amy Carlson Gustafson

LOCAL BUSINESSES

Some St. Paul shop and restaurant operators felt anger and disappointment the convention didn't translate into more business for them.

Many reported a moderate increase in sales from what's normally a slow Labor Day week. Establishments on Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis seemed to do the best, being near several hotels. Restaurateurs on St. Paul's West Seventh Street said sales were hurt by an Xcel security fence that kept convention-goers from roaming into the neighborhood.

Mayor Chris Coleman said Friday that the owners of Meritage restaurant told him it was like having an extra month of business.

"Not everyone benefited during the four days of the convention," he said.

— Gita Sitaramiah

CIVICFEST

Hoping to give all Minnesotans a close-up look at politics and the presidency, local organizers assembled CivicFest, a huge exhibit of Americana and history that took place at the Minneapolis Convention Center.

Organizers projected — and told vendors — that 150,000 people would visit CivicFest. But the numbers never approached that, thanks in part to the \$15-per-adult admission that kept the public

away.

After angry complaints from vendors, the admission fee was eliminated for the final three days of CivicFest. That helped draw some crowds — including many school groups — and organizers report that ultimately about 75,000 people attended.

— Tom Webb

DELEGATE REACTION

In interview after interview, delegates were genuinely delighted by the hospitality and welcome they received in Minnesota and volunteered comments on how impressed they were by the Twin Cities.

Daryl Kramer, a delegate from Texas, was among the many who'd never been to Minnesota. He figured it would be "sort of a northern snobby" region, filled with Democrats who'd resent having Republicans here.

"The city really outdid itself," he said Friday. "There were people on every corner saying, 'Oh, can we help you with directions?' ... We were very surprised."

Give credit to the 10,000 volunteers, who made visitors feel especially welcome. Delegates also lauded the security forces, who allayed their concerns about tear gas and anarchists.

Whether it was the delegates from American Samoa, who were put up in private homes, or those from Idaho, who marveled at the economic vitality of the region, the reaction was largely the same: "We're impressed."

— Tom Webb

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MINNESOTA POLITICS

The convention was a political boon to both the McCain campaign in Minnesota and the state Republican Party.

Before the convention, the social conservatives who dominate the Minnesota GOP weren't very excited about John McCain. But after he picked Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin — a hockey mom who shares their views on guns, God and abortion — and she gave a spirited speech that captured the national imagination, the state party's activist base was galvanized into action, state Republican Party Chairman Ron Carey said.

Once-tepid McCain supporters are now "hard-core supporters," Carey said. Such activists are absolutely critical to campaigns, because they're the ones who pound lawn signs, drop literature and make get-out-the-vote calls.

In addition, holding the convention in St. Paul meant Minnesota voters were exposed — and presumably paid more attention — to Republican messages for the past week, McCain campaign spokesman Tom Steward said.

"Our phones are ringing off the hook from people asking for lawn signs and literature and volunteering to work for the campaign," Steward said.

— Bill Salisbury

PUBLIC SAFETY

There were more than 3,700 police officers securing the RNC and "with the exception of one or two windows, downtown St. Paul remained open for business and continued to flow," St. Paul Police Chief John Harrington said. "The convention

operated virtually ... without any interruption."

Police used tear gas, pepper spray, smoke grenades and flash-bangs to try to disperse crowds, including anarchists who said they wanted to disrupt the convention. On Monday, groups shattered windows, threw rocks, slashed tires and blocked traffic.

There were 818 RNC-related arrests, which appears to be the second most at a national political convention.

— Mara H. Gottfried

TRANSPORTATION

Navigating the Twin Cities during the convention went "reasonably well," transportation officials say — with the disclaimer that large inconveniences were forecast.

Of course, if your bus was delayed, or you found yourself trapped on the wrong side of a police line, you might have had what Bob Gibbons of Metro Transit called an "atrocious delay."

Metro Transit's planned bus detours through downtown St. Paul had to be scrapped in favor of a complete shutdown of downtown service for more than three hours Monday afternoon while police dealt with large crowds and small groups of vandals.

The interstate highways stayed open, and driving around the metro area in general was unaffected. But downtown St. Paul faced rarely seen traffic jams several days, said Bruce Beese, the city's director of public works.

Downtown parking proved no problem, suggesting that workers either stayed away or took public

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transit.

— Dave Orrick

PROTESTERS

Despite battling what they view as repression by the city, police brutality, unwarranted arrests and shows of overwhelming force, organizers behind some of the biggest protests at the convention were left with smiles on their faces.

Demonstrators not only drew large amounts of media coverage both locally and nationally, but they even managed to disrupt speeches by the two biggest stars at the event — John McCain and Sarah Palin.

Deb Konechne, a St. Paul resident who helped bring thousands to the streets, said she and others were successful in driving home a message of peace and advocating for spending on human needs, rather than war.

"I think absolutely we got our message out, in spite of the massive police presence and attempts at intimidation," Konechne said.

— Jason Hoppin

PARTIES AND STARS

Celebrities could be found left and right at the Democratic National Convention in Colorado a week before, but the RNC parties in the Twin Cities were more subdued. Still, there were some fun shindigs and hangouts.

The Google/Vanity Fair party at the Walker Art Center the final day of the convention was a fabulous and elegant bash. Beautiful art, architecture, dim lighting, votive candles ... The DJ

kept the crowd upbeat. Celebs included Henry Kissinger and Rosario Dawson.

The AgNite Gala at the Depot in downtown Minneapolis felt homey for a party that was so expansive. Strangers were chatty and friendly. The crowd ate cheese and pork chops and listened to '70s rockers Styx.

The late-night party at Solera in downtown Minneapolis on Monday night drew plenty of movers and shakers, packing all three floors and the rooftop bar. The elbow-to-elbow soiree turned into a benefit for Hurricane Gustav victims with the American Red Cross on hand for donations.

— Nancy Ngo

CITY HALL

No one likes scenes of tear gas being set off in his hometown less than a mayor facing re-election.

But so far, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman has maintained that police activity was necessary to put a stop to the chaos that erupted on the first day of the convention. And by no means was it enough to overshadow the event and the publicity it brought St. Paul, he said.

"Unbelievable success, no question about it," Coleman said. "You can't buy the kind of publicity we've received. I was talking to the British ambassador, and we were talking about how the BBC had been talking about St. Paul, Minnesota, all week long. People around the globe have heard of the city and kind of got to know it a little bit."

— Jason Hoppin

COMMUNICATIONS

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Wireless traffic — through cell phones, laptops, BlackBerries — was expected to explode when 45,000 delegates, media members and others hit town, but it exceeded even those high expectations, a Verizon Wireless spokeswoman said Friday.

"Our traffic in downtown St. Paul was above our 33 percent voice and 150 percent data estimates," said Karen Smith, a company spokeswoman.

Transmissions via cell sites were up to three times more numerous than during a normal week. Even voice calls rose by about 80 percent over a normal week.

ATT spent \$13 million to prepare for the additional burden placed upon its network, while Verizon Wireless spent \$6.4 million. Many of the network improvements will remain, too, providing better coverage in St. Paul.

— Les Suzukamo

REACTION IN PRINT

At a news conference Friday, civic boosters claimed that the RNC brought 8 billion media impressions of the Twin Cities, which is "the equivalent of a \$330 million ad campaign."

Whatever the actual number, there's no doubt: The area received a landslide of attention from the RNC.

During the run-up to the convention, publications prepared a raft of overwhelmingly positive looks at the Twin Cities — mentioning the lakes and Summit Avenue, the Mall of America and the Guthrie Theater.

The tone changed somewhat as Hurricane Gustav loomed, and threatened to steal the spotlight. It changed further when TV carried violent confrontations on St. Paul's streets between riot

police and masked anarchists.

Humor columnist Dave Barry was here and wrote, "The Republican convention is over, and the friendly, picturesque city of St. Paul now will take down the roughly 63,000 miles of really high security fence that protected the delegates and news media from ever coming into direct contact with the friendly, picturesque city of St. Paul."

Still, in the official media-impression tally, all mentions count.

— Tom Webb

NATIONAL POLITICS

While we won't know if the convention was a success for John McCain until Election Day, it is clear that Republicans averted a disaster.

Last weekend, RNC organizers wondered whether there would even be a convention. Hurricane Gustav was heading toward New Orleans, and Republicans didn't want to hold a political celebration during a catastrophe.

On Monday, they scrapped the scheduled political rhetoric and conducted their essential business in a short session.

But by Tuesday, Gustav had diminished, and the Republicans belatedly revved up a night of McCain-boosting speeches.

On Wednesday, they had to deal with a second storm, "the media hurricane around Sarah Palin," said Carleton College political science professor Steve Schier. McCain had picked the little-known Alaska governor as his running mate the previous Friday, and she was getting critical reviews in the press.

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But Palin "hit a grand slam" in her speech to the convention that evening, knocking back the media criticism, said Larry Jacobs, director of the University of Minnesota's Center for the Study of Politics and Governance.

That set the stage for McCain's big, final-night speech on Thursday. He got mixed reviews, but the convention ended on a high note with excited delegates dancing in the aisles.

"They came out of this convention, I think, in much better shape than anyone expected a week ago," Schier said.

— Bill Salisbury

John Brewer contributed to this report.

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